

President Rose, Members of the College, and Guests.

Assalamualaikum. *(Pause)*

Thank you all for being here this afternoon to celebrate your loved ones and the Bowdoin community. I am beyond grateful to be given this opportunity to share with you today: a journey of personal growth through language learning. However, sitting in the audience, the one person that I want to share this message with the most may not fully understand me because of our language barrier in English.

So to my mom, 媽媽我等一會兒翻譯給你聽。 *(Mom, I will translate this for you later.)*

As you can see, English has not always been my language of choice to express myself. I was born in Hangzhou, China during the time of Mandarin-only education initiative while my family and neighbors communicated in our local dialect. While Mandarin united China, it separated me from my background. At school, I was taught that speaking Mandarin marked being educated and of higher socioeconomic status while our local dialect indicated an older, outdated generation. I honed my Mandarin pronunciation excessively, became proudly monolingual, and took great pride when the teacher told other students to mimic my pronunciation. However, those glory days soon ended.

In 2005, spring of second grade, my family moved to Houston, Texas and I became mute in school. We lived in a prominently Hispanic neighborhood with many children learning English at school, but they would sneak in Spanish with each other while I couldn't. I couldn't even distinguish between the two foreign languages nor could I muster up the sentence to ask for permission to go to the bathroom. My parents insisted on speaking only Mandarin at home, both out of necessity and out of determination, so I could keep up my Mandarin skills and not lose my connection with my family and culture. I learned English from books, from television, and from making phone calls to companies on behalf of my mom, who does not have the privilege of learning English as I do.

The divide between the languages and my personalities in them widened. English existed for formal communication and the battle of the outside world, where I needed to speak up for myself and make myself heard. Mandarin provided a shelter for my delicate, fragile feelings, where I had the luxury to continue to act like a child.

Until coming to Bowdoin, learning a new language had been out of necessity: whether the English I needed to function in society, or the useful Spanish I absorbed through hearing my neighbors discipline their children. Every language had to prove itself useful before I would give it attention. However, at Bowdoin, under the freedom of the liberal arts education and the general cluelessness of a first-year student, I began learning Japanese, the language of China's historical and political nemesis. I didn't have a specific goal, such as wanting to work in Japan or to watch anime without subtitles. I joined simply because I felt an immediate personal connection to the professors and my classmates from day one. My senseis began class not by drilling us with grammar or vocabulary, but by teaching us how to politely turn in our homework or to enter an elevator under Japanese cultural norms. While stumbling through conjugations and pronunciation mishaps, I delved into Japan's history and the complex interpersonal relationships embedded in the language. I started to reflect on my own misconceptions and learned to express my respect for others. As I formed my family in the Bowdoin Japanese Program, I also found another personality, another outlet, and another perspective.

Just like how I had to leave the multilingual Houston to feel appreciation for home, I had to leave the United States to find my connection with English. During my semesters in Japan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, I learned to alter my spoken English to become grammatically incorrect and skipped over ostentatious adjectives and idioms in order to communicate better. In doing so, I began to appreciate the beauty in the fluidity of languages, from creolization and slang to the ability to code-switch seamlessly between multiple languages in order to communicate more nuanced

connotations. We even had our nonverbal cues to fall back on when all else failed. I became more aware of the cultural differences and how much I did not yet know but curiously and eagerly sought out. I listened to my hosts share nostalgic tales from their youth and offer life advice. They spoke with such emotion and wisdom in their native languages. I became addicted to those stories and I worked harder to learn their languages so I can hear more. In return, they patiently put up with my attempts, successful and not, and unceasingly cheered me on.

The more I listened, the more I began to question the limits of language, in particular that of English. While English has allowed me to travel across borders to meet so many people, it is loaded with hegemonic remnants and incomplete inclusiveness. For example, in Houston, we don't really have seasons, at least not the four distinctive ones like in Maine. Yet, my friends and I always tried so hard to make the words "fall" and "winter" fit because those were the only terms we were taught. In the Indian Ocean island of Sri Lanka, those terms fit even less appropriately. Children only learned about the "four seasons" through English-medium science textbooks and Western media, while terms such as "dry" or "rainy" may be much more applicable in the tropics. Although I had plenty of thoughts to share with my host family, I once again felt mute, as I did in my second grade ESL class. I did not have enough vocabulary to recount my own story or to fully understand theirs. I realized that I couldn't encapsulate their experiences in the very few ways I knew. I needed to learn their languages and their forms of expression. I needed to truly listen to their voices.

Over our four years at Bowdoin, we are constantly taught and pushed to find ways to express ourselves and our ideas. From our academically intense first-year seminars to our exploratory art forms, we learned to develop our own voices and to use them creatively to initiate a difference, no matter how small. Yet, caught in the fervors of self-expression, we must remind ourselves to consider our audience and their backgrounds beyond the Bowdoin context. Would the elementary school students we tutor find contemplations of postcolonial literary theory interesting

or would they prefer a chat about cats versus dogs? Would the families coming in for income taxes assistance want to be boggled down by tax terms or can we rephrase everything in a more accessible way? Without first listening and understanding the position that my students and my clients are in, I cannot fully communicate with them from their perspective.

Therefore, Class of 2019, friends and families of the Bowdoin community, I urge you, in addition to finding and exercising your voice, to also listen to and learn to speak the languages of the people that you will encounter in life. I hope that we can carry forward the Common Good through our most fundamental human trait to communicate with each other and to appreciate the value of the stories you will hear. To take a genuine interest in what others have to say and to reflect on our own perceptions. I want us all to find our languages and ways to showcase our voices to create change without forgetting to listen to one another while keeping in mind that someone on this beautiful and changing planet will appreciate your humor, your voices, and your stories.

Congratulations once again *ASL sign for Congratulations* Terima kasih. Istutiyi. Arigatou gozaimasu. Thank you all. *sign ASL* And xie xie da jia.